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Baschiera, S., & Re, V. (2019). National Screen Productions and Global SVOD Services: The Case of Netflix in UK and Italy. *Comunicazioni Sociali*. https://doi.org/10.26350/001200_000028

Published in:
Comunicazioni Sociali

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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National Screen Productions and Global SVOD Services: The Case of Netflix in UK and Italy¹

1. Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, the concept of national cinema has been at the centre of several debates within film studies, which have attempted to redefine it and reframe its use and development in a period of technological, economic, and socio-political changes. From the impact of new media² to the increasing transnational dimension of the screen industry³, the new focus on globalization and post-nationalism led to a re-evaluation of the idea of ‘national’ and its function within the discipline. However, as John Hill did not fail to notice, “despite the pronouncement of the death of the ‘national’ by a number of writers, discourses of the ‘national’ do, nevertheless, continue to structure and inform how films of various kinds are categorized, funded, promoted and made sense of by a range of social actors ranging from politicians and civil servants to filmmakers, critics and audiences”⁴.

The persistence of the national can be easily found in film policy and its definition of ‘nationality’ aimed to provide production support and protectionist measures⁵. Moreover, the national is still present in its “generic function”⁶, creating sets of expectations and working within marketing strategies. By looking at national cinema from a consumption-based approach⁷ we can also grasp its recurrence, alongside genres, in the categorization and organization of online catalogues.

* Queen’s University Belfast – s.baschiera@qub.ac.uk.

** Link Campus University, Rome – v.re@unilink.it.

¹ Having worked in close collaboration on all aspects of the present essay, the two authors divided the work as follows: Stefano Baschiera wrote sections 1, 2, 5 and 6; Valentina Re wrote sections 3 and 4.

² See P. Rosen, “Nation and Anti-Nation: Concepts of National Cinema in the ‘New’ Media Era”, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 5, 3 (1996): 375-402.

³ See among others: V. Vitali, P. Willemsen, eds., *Theorising National Cinema*, London: British Film Institute, 2006; M. Hjort, “On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism”, in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, edited by N. Ďurovičová, K. Newman, New York: Routledge, 2010: 12-33; W. Higbee, S. H. Lim, “Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies”, *Transnational Cinemas*, 1, 1 (2010): 7-21.

⁴ J. Hill, “Living with Hollywood: British film policy and the definition of ‘nationality’”, *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 22, 5 (2016): 706-723 (707).

⁵ On the UK’s cultural test, see J. Hill, “Living with Hollywood”, on Italian policy see M. Cucco, “L’industria e le leggi del cinema in Italia (2000-2015)”, in *Il cinema di Stato: Finanziamento pubblico ed economia simbolica nel cinema italiano contemporaneo*, edited by M. Cucco, G. Manzoli, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017: 33-83.

⁶ T. Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*, London: BFI, 1989.

⁷ A. Higson, “The Concept of National Cinema”, *Screen*, 30, 4 (1989): 36-46 (36).

The purpose of this article is therefore to analyse the role played by the category of ‘nationality’ in global SVOD (subscription video on demand) services by looking at Netflix and its presence in the European context, with a focus on two key audio-visual markets: those of the UK and Italy. We argue that the persistence of the concept of ‘nationality’ on streaming services, albeit arguably marginal, suggests a new understanding of its function within contemporary media conglomerates.

2. The Role of Netflix in British and Italian Audiovisual Markets

In the VOD (Video on demand) sector, SVOD services such as Netflix represent a new, disruptive force to established distribution models. Different from TVOD (Transactional video on demand), which can be seen as an online substitute for physical video (rental and purchase), the SVOD model better meets the needs of a new, pervasive “on demand culture”. This expression was used by Chuck Tryon⁸ to define a widespread promise and expectation of access “anytime, anywhere”, or, more precisely, of new forms of immediate, personalized, ubiquitous and expanded access to films and television shows. Within the SVOD model, viewers are looking for a particular ‘branded’ experience, a curatorial approach and, above all, a seemingly endless catalogue that is accessible by paying a monthly fee.

SVOD has also been considered an “attack on [...] the elements of exclusivity and timing upon which windows are constructed”⁹. Indeed, it undermines the primacy of theatrical release, bypassing it or encouraging day and date release strategies, and threatens the control exerted by traditional intermediaries, as the on-going conflict between Cannes film festival and Netflix shows very well¹⁰.

Moreover, SVOD services like Netflix and Amazon largely invest in original content: the development of original productions allows them both to offer some easily recognizable ‘branded’ hits to a new customer base¹¹, and to penetrate new markets investing in local productions, problematizing once more the idea of national belonging.

⁸ C. Tryon, *On-demand Culture. Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies*, Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013.

⁹ J. Ulin, *The Business of Media Distribution*, New York-London: Focal Press, 2009, 299.

¹⁰ Based on a sharp conflict started in 2017, the 2018 Cannes film festival has changed its regulation and prevented movies without a theatrical distribution to be selected for the official competition.

¹¹ If the rights have not previously been sold to a national Pay TV, as was the case for *House of Cards* in Italy, prior to Netflix was made available in that country.

Netflix clearly epitomizes the SVOD model and, helpfully for our argument, it features a pan-European presence; a high penetration rate and market share¹²; and a strong reliance on generic organization of its catalogues, making it an ideal case study. Netflix's new investment plan for European productions¹³ not only challenges traditional broadcasters across Europe but, as we shall discuss later, contributes to on-going debates regarding economic-driven cultural policy and production-based understanding of the concept of the national.

On this occasion, our analysis of the presence of Netflix in Europe will focus on its offering in UK and Italy. What is more relevant to our analysis is that the two markets represent the different ends of the company's European expansion and of the penetration of the SVOD model. While the UK was the first territory where Netflix launched in Europe in 2012, Italy joined at a later stage in 2015, when the presence on the continent of the SVOD service was already well established¹⁴. In 2016, the UK stood out with a SVOD penetration rate of 43%, whereas Italy registered only 9%. Among the SVOD services, Netflix had a market share of 61% in the UK and 53% in Italy. In this respect, studying the UK and Italy allows to draw a comparison between two catalogues which significantly differ in the amount and diversity of titles, in two differently-shaped SVOD markets that present a huge difference in revenues – 804 million EUR for UK and 99m in Italy¹⁵.

Despite the differences between SVOD markets, the two countries are among the traditional 'great five' of national production within the European screen industry sector. From 2011 to 2015, they represented – along with France, Germany, and Spain – 65% of total European film production. On average, 271 films were produced per year in the UK and 169 in Italy, making a significant influx of national cinema in the respective local markets¹⁶.

The UK is also a dominant force in national TV production, having made 112.5 titles between 2015 and 2016, representing 12% of all European production – while Italy only accounts for a much smaller 4% (40.5 titles)¹⁷.

¹² Netflix holds an approximate 47% of the total number of over-the-top (OTT) SVOD subscribers in the EU.

¹³ M. Garrahan, "Netflix Plots \$1bn European Investment Drive", *The Financial Times*, April 18, 2018 <https://www.ft.com/content/952029b0-4311-11e8-93cf-67ac3a6482fd> (accessed July 27, 2018)

¹⁴ For an analysis of the introduction of Netflix in the Italian territory see L. Barra, "On-Demand Isn't Built in a Day: Promotional Rhetoric and the Challenges of Netflix's Arrival in Italy", *Cinéma & Cie*, 17, 29 (2017): 19-32.

¹⁵ See *Trends in the EU SVOD Market*, Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2017.

¹⁶ Cf. *The Circulation of EU Non-national Films – A Sample Study: Cinema, Television and Transactional Video on-Demand*, Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2017.

¹⁷ See *TV Fiction Production in the European Union*, Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2017.

The analysis of the presence of national productions in the British and Italian Netflix catalogues will focus on their availability and discoverability, considering in particular what features the SVOD service finds pertinent to assign a ‘national’ belonging, and how such a ‘label’ of nationality works to guide the user within the catalogue. The question of availability, therefore, frames the idea of national from a production perspective, engaging with elements of cultural policy and EU protective measures. Discoverability instead dictates a pragmatic approach, encouraging an understanding of the concept of national for its function as identifier in the labelling, tagging and categorization of online catalogues. Hence, it re-establishes the importance of national cinema as a constructive taxonomic tool, that is just as constructive as ‘authorship’, ‘genre’, and ‘period’¹⁸.

3. Nationality as Country of Origin: Availability in the European Market

The availability of national screen productions in a given market – namely, films or TV productions for which the first (or main) country of origin corresponds to the country in which the SVOD catalogue is offered – has been at the centre of a series of specific reports¹⁹. Indeed, this issue is becoming increasingly important in light of the EU DSM (Digital Single Market) policies and the continually-revised the AVMS (Audiovisual Media Services) Directive²⁰, which imply cross-border portability²¹, cross-border access²², and especially new programming and investment obligations for the promotion of European works. In order to provide European citizens with richer access to online cultural goods and to support the European creative industries, these measures create a common regulatory framework for both linear and non-linear audiovisual media that fits the digital age, thus compelling global Internet companies to make a greater effort to support the local audiovisual cultures and economies in which they operate.

¹⁸ See J. White, “National Belonging”, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 2, 2 (2004): 211-232.

¹⁹ In addition to the reports released by the European Audiovisual Observatory (see <https://www.obs.coe.int/en/web/observatoire/industry/home-video-and-vod>, accessed July 27, 2018), see at least R. Lobato, A. Scarlata, *Australian Content in SVOD Catalogs: Availability and Discoverability*, 2017, <https://www.communications.gov.au/sites/g/files/net301/f/submissions/ramon-lobato-and-alexa-scarlata.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2018).

²⁰ “Revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD)”, European Commission, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/revision-audiovisual-media-services-directive-avmsd> (accessed June 27, 2018)

²¹ “Cross-border portability of online content services”, European Commission, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/cross-border-portability-online-content-services> (accessed June 27, 2018).

²² “Modernisation of the EU copyright rules”, European Commission, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/modernisation-eu-copyright-rules> (accessed June 27, 2018).

Under the DSM strategy and the revised Directive, VOD services will need to ensure at least a 30% share of European works (without further specifications about nationality), in their catalogues, and provide them a good visibility (prominence). Moreover, member states will have the power to impose a financial contribution for the production of European works and to impose fees on providers of on-demand services in their territory, even if the providers are based in other member states²³.

National laws pursue the same objectives, and combine support for European productions with that for national audiovisual industries. For instance, the most recent obligations in the promotion of national and European content were introduced in Italy by law no. 220/2016, which at present governs the entire Italian audiovisual sector, specified in the legislative decree no. 204 of December 7, 2017. The ruling establishes that specific quotas of European works – 30% of the total hours – and “audiovisual works of Italian original expression” – 15% of the total amount of hours – must be included in VOD catalogues. It also specifies investment commitments and the obligation to give prominence, and delegates the task of preparing implementation regulation to the Italian Communication Authority²⁴.

In this respect, it is worth noting that most of the currently available data about the accessibility of European works and of film and TV content is based on a ‘productive’ definition of ‘national content’ (content produced in the same country in which the catalogue is offered) that may ultimately not match the ‘legislative’ definitions proposed by other national laws. The Italian case is a good example of this, since the current notions of audiovisual/cinematic work “of Italian original expression” do not include the country of origin as a necessary criterion to be considered as Italian²⁵.

In addition to being relevant to the current national and European policies supporting the creative sector, a quantitative overview of the availability of national screen production across the continent also supplies an essential framework for the issue of discoverability. In other words, it is important to estimate how many European national and non-national items a certain catalogue offers, before being able to analyse how these items are positioned into the catalogue through recommendation systems.

The most updated and reliable data is released by the EAO, the European Audiovisual Observatory. In the entire SVOD European market, European (EU28) cinema has a 19%

²³ “Fact Sheet. Digital Single Market: Updated Audiovisual Rules”, European Commission, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-18-4093_en.htm (accessed June 27, 2018).

²⁴ This regulation has just undergone a public consultation process: see Delibera no. 184/18/CONS, <http://www.agcom.it/visualizza-documento/0519dd2f-ba24-46dd-8379-015f4b4ddce1> (accessed July 27, 2018).

²⁵ On the other hand, according to the inter-ministerial Decree dated February 28, 2013, in order to be considered a work “of Italian original expression” a film must present 50 per cent of dialogue in Italian.

share, of which 3% is national cinema²⁶. If we limit the scope to Netflix's European offering, the average shares are lower, respectively 16% and 2%. Overall, the share of EU films ranges from 21% in the catalogues in France and Spain to 12% in Portugal. Looking at the Italian Netflix catalogue (1590 films) the presence of European films is about 21%, of which 4% are national productions. The UK catalogue (2490 films), instead, shows a predominance of national cinema in the European productions offered: of a share of 17%, some 10% are films made by the UK. In general, in the European market, the share of national cinema ranges from 10% in the UK to 0% in many countries, including Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus and the Czech Republic, among others.

As for TV content, European (EU28) fiction has a share of 17%, of which 4% is national production²⁷. As for films, if we limit the scope to Netflix's European offering the shares are lower, 15% and 1%. The percentage of European TV content in the Italian Netflix catalogue (13,798 episodes and 475 titles) is about 15%, of which 2% is national content; both are far lower than in the UK catalogue (21,646 episodes and 1282 titles), where European TV content has a share of 21%, with a predominance of national content at 15%.

No official data is available regarding the presence of specific European non-national cinemas in the SVOD sector²⁸. The only data about the availability of non-national TV content, is limited to single titles present in 8 catalogues²⁹. Among the 362 different EU 28 TV content titles in these catalogues, the majority come from the UK (44% or 160 titles), while Italy only takes a tiny 2% (6 titles).

Trying to empirically collect more specific and updated data, we see that the total number of items labelled as "Italian" in the Italian Netflix catalogue is 136, including 108 films and 28 TV series. Therefore, national screen productions represent 4.4% of the entire catalogue (3065 titles)³⁰. Italian films amount to 4.7% of the films offered, and TV shows to 3.6% of

²⁶ All data refer to the cumulative film offering (42236 titles). See G. Fontaine, C. Grece, *Origin of Films and TV Content in VOD Catalogues & Visibility of Films on VOD Services*, Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016.

²⁷ All data refer to cumulate TV episodes (714139, TV series titles 28335). See *The origin of TV content in VOD catalogues – 2017 edition* European Audiovisual Observatory, Strasbourg, December 2017.

²⁸ The only official data available concern TVOD services. Among the 33810 EU non-national films in TVOD catalogues (October 2016), Italian films account for the 6 per cent (1853 titles), far lower than UK films, 40 per cent (13563 titles). See *The Circulation of EU Non-national Films – A Sample Study: Cinema, Television and Transactional Video on-Demand*, Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2017.

²⁹ The countries are AT; DE; DK; FI; FR; GB; NL; SE. See G. Fontaine, C. Grece C., *Origin of Films and TV Content in VOD Catalogues & Visibility of Films on VOD Services*, Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016

³⁰ Data were collected in June 2018. To calculate percentages, the total number of items in the catalogue is taken from Unogs, <http://unogs.com>, accessed July 20, 2018. Given the continuous variations occurring in SVOD catalogues, these data do not aim to provide a comprehensive overview. Rather, they simply want to suggest

the entire TV content. The total number of labelled British items is 84, including 42 films and 42 TV series. They represent 2.7% of the entire catalogue. British films amount to 1.8% of all movies, and TV shows to 5.4% of the entire TV content. US TV series alone (288 items) represent 37.7% of all TV content and 9.4% of the overall catalogue, showing the continuous dominance of the American Screen Industry.

In the UK Netflix catalogue, the total number of labelled British items is 551 divided into 262 TV shows and 289 films representing 10.5% of the entire catalogue (5216) – more than twice the national production in the Italian catalogue. British films make up 8% of the films available while the TV shows cover an impressive 17% of the TV products offered overall.

In addition to offering a necessary background to the qualitative analysis that follows, this brief quantitative analysis is already revealing of a series of considerations of the role played by national productions in Netflix's catalogue. First, it shows the strength and appeal of British content and especially TV productions, both in the internal market and abroad, as the Italian Netflix catalogue clearly shows. Second, the difficulty of collecting empirical and reliable data about the presence of European content, and, consequently, about its internal composition in terms of European non-national screen productions, stresses the relative weakness of the European identifier in different national catalogues, promoting an idea of homogeneity instead of the cultural diversification promoted by EU cultural policies.

4. The Question of 'National' and SVOD Catalogues: Discoverability in the European Market

While availability is a quantitative notion and concerns the number of titles offered, and the corresponding share; discoverability is a qualitative notion and concerns the visibility, or prominence, of specific kinds of content. That is, the multiple ways in which they are made visible in the catalogue through content structure, categories for navigation, search options, and recommendation systems.

Considering the role that the concept of nationality plays as a taxonomic tool for the organization of Netflix's catalogue is important for at least two, well-defined reasons. The first, closely linked with the question of availability, is for an 'up to bottom' approach where

some trends and possible developments based on the official data provided by EAO, while offering an appropriate framework to discuss discoverability.

the nationality is understood on the basis of national regulations and its presence in the catalogue is hence partially dictated by sets of policies.

As already mentioned, the revised AMSD implies an obligation for VOD services to “give prominence” to European works in their catalogues and such parameters are increasingly present also in national regulations. The main issue arising from these policies is of course that of a definition of “prominence”. The 2017 report by EAO on the visibility of films and TV content defines “visibility” as is mentioned on the home page of the service, or a promotional spot³¹.

For instance, the new Italian draft Regulation about programming obligations for media services provides a list of criteria to assess the prominence given to European works by VOD services, both in their catalogues and promotional campaigns. Such criteria feature: the indication of the country of origin in the catalogue; using trailers or visuals to enhance visibility; placing in the home page a stable category or collection including all the European works; providing possibilities for searching for European works; including at least a share of 20 per cent of European works in the content suggested through recommendation systems.

The regulation of “prominence” (at national and supranational level) is a sensitive topic since it directly affects the kind of branded experience and style of access that VOD services offer.

The second reason is instead of a ‘algorithm mediated bottom up’ approach, where the actual everyday use of the national taxonomy stresses the classificatory role of the streaming service and shapes the understanding of the concept of national in a moment of cross-border availability, by association with other categories, labels, and genres. The national here, is present in an ecosystem generating new meanings and understandings, stressing the fluidity of the concept beyond that of policymakers.

As Morris and Powers point out in their argument about streaming music services, “in an ecosystem where many of the services offer the same catalogues of content, the affective cues and features for discovering and encountering content become the main point of differentiation”³². In addition to representing a key strategy to “extract profit and value from the consumption process”³³, interface and curatorial mechanisms create the service’s identity since “services demonstrate their quality through how they recommend and categorize content”³⁴.

³¹ *The Visibility of Films and TV Content on VOD*, Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2017.

³² J. Wade Morris, D Powers, “Control, Curation and Musical Experience in Streaming Music Services, *Creative Industries Journal*, 8, 2 (2015): 106-122 (117).

³³ J. Wade Morris, D. Powers, 117

³⁴ J. Wade Morris, D. Powers, 114

Major global SVOD services like Netflix and Amazon have been mainly associated with the idea of a new, contemporary “data-driven algorithmic culture”³⁵, in which, thanks to “application of metadata systems and filtering technologies to the process of program selection”³⁶, increasingly sophisticated recommendation systems combine popularity with personalization in order to produce “a never-ending stream of custom-tailored pleasure”³⁷ or, more precisely, “a steady stream of programming designed to stay in touch with our changing rhythms and moods, selected and accessible with no effort on our part, anticipating our every interest and nearly infinite in its capacities”³⁸.

While scholars have stressed that algorithms must be conceived as “socio-technical assemblages”, “joining together the human and the nonhuman, the cultural and the computational”³⁹, in the general discourses about algorithms, the fundamental human agency implied in any algorithmic system, namely the strong editorial activity that provides data to be processed, tends to be completely removed, in order to emphasize the efficiency and objectivity of the machine agency. Consistently with this general rhetoric about algorithm, in the framework of its communications strategies, Netflix tend to remove the role of meta-data programmers, as well as the underlying tagging system⁴⁰ created by Todd Yellin, as the research done by Gomez-Urbe and Hunt on Netflix recommender system shows very well⁴¹. Without any ambition to retrace Netflix’s tagging practices, our aim is to discuss how the idea of nationality takes shape in content organization, navigational options, and recommendation systems; by looking at the different tags and labels with which it is associated, and what categories contributes to create. Of course, we must assume that this discussion is inevitably affected by personalization and how the recommender system works. No “objectives” and exhaustive outcomes are possible from a user perspective, yet we can detect some trends and recurring configurations. It is noteworthy that what makes it difficult to access reliable data about content organization in Netflix’s catalogue, also raises doubts

³⁵ T. Striphas, “Algorithmic Culture”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4-5, 18 (2015) 396. See also A. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. For recent overviews see S. Baschiera, F. Di Chiara, V. Re “The Logics of Re-Intermediation”, and G. Avezzù, “The Data Don’t Speak for Themselves: The Humanity of VOD Recommender Systems”, *Cinéma & Cie*, 17, 29 (2017), 9-18 and 51-66.

³⁶ W. Uricchio, “Television’s Next Generation: Technology/Interface Culture/Flow”, in *Television after TV*, edited by L. Spigel, J. Olsson, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2004: 172.

³⁷ W. Uricchio, 178.

³⁸ W. Uricchio, 177.

³⁹ T. Striphas, 408 (note 1).

⁴⁰ Known as “Netflix Quantum Theory”, that provides guidelines to create almost 80,000 unique ways to describe types of video.

⁴¹ C. Gomez-Urbe, N. Hunt, “The Netflix Recommender System: Algorithms, Business Value, and Innovation”, *ACM Trans. Manage. Inf. Syst.*, 6, 4 (2015).

about obligations concerning prominence. The Netflix rhetoric and experience is all about choice and personalization. Therefore, one may wonder whether it would be acceptable that European and/or national content would be somehow ‘imposed’ to users who do not usually watch these kinds of products.

The Netflix homepage is, in fact, organized in a streams of ‘personalized’ content. The homepage has a key role in the Netflix experience since it is “the main presentation of recommendations, where 2 of every 3 hours streamed on Netflix are discovered”⁴². The list of categories refers to the user’s previous viewings and suggests similar content, offering the impression of an infinite catalogue that takes the shape of endless, parallel flows based on the user’s taste. From this perspective, references to the country/countries can occasionally appear when they are relevant to the user’s personal activity, organized in categories such as US crime TV programme, Suspenseful international TV shows, International political thriller, Foreign art house, European films and programmes, Romantic Latin American comedies; Italian films.

It is noteworthy that the use of geographical origin in the catalogue’s categories is not limited to single countries, rather it can also refer to continents (Europe) or to a heterogeneous set of countries – as in the case of the labels “international” and “foreign”, intended as “non-US”. Furthermore, the national belonging can be variously combined with elements referring to traditional genres, adjectives, and other disparate descriptors.

More often, however, the national taxonomy, when present, is well hidden in the depth of the catalogue. National cinemas or TV content– produced in a different country from the one in which the catalogue is available – tend to appear as specific categories only when a user intentionally searches for them in the search engine provided by the service.

Searching for “British” in the Italian catalogue, for instance, leads to the following labels which show how nationality is combined and associated with other elements: British TV programmes; British films; British TV Comedies; British Crime dramas; British TV Dramas; British Comedies; British Detective TV Programmes; British Crime TV Programmes; British TV Mysteries. Similar terms appear also in the British catalogue. However, searching for “English” in the Italian catalogue offers an understanding of the nationality which has thematical connotations such as: *umorismo inglese* (British Humour), *commedie con umorismo inglese* (British Humour comedies). In the British catalogues, instead, English refers mainly to audio options and a category “ESL English as Second language”.

⁴² C. Gomez-Uribe, N. Hunt.

Italian content seems to be differently organized. Searching for “Italian”, the following labels become accessible: Italian Films, Italian Films and TV, Italian-language films; Award-Winning Italian Movies; Audio in Italian; Italian TV; Critically-acclaimed Italian Films; Discovering Italy, Italian Comedies.

Some relevant differences immediately emerge: the categories available through the search engine emphasize British TV more than British cinema, and Italian cinema more than Italian TV. While British production is mainly characterized through genres, and crime definitely prevails, Italian cinema is rather characterized by its aesthetic qualities, stressing its cultural capital (the references to film criticism and awards). A number of labels do not match with the productive or regulatory definitions of national cinema, suggesting instead a different kind of thematization of nationhood, also recurring to national stereotypes such as Italian beautiful locations (Discovering Italy) and British humour.

The last issue on the presence of the concept of national within Netflix’s catalogue concerns the description of the product and the users’ reviews. The textual description usually lists no more than four genres and subgenres while, in most of the cases, neither the origin nor the available languages for audio tracks and subtitles are mentioned. Yet, references to nationality used to regularly recur in the reviews, showing that the national belonging still persists as a relevant element for consumption, interpretation, and assessment⁴³.

Let us consider, for instance, the case of the TV crime drama *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013-2017) in the Italian catalogue⁴⁴. The show is particularly appreciated because of its capacity to allow the Italian public to discover little known, suggestive landscapes and locations from the United Kingdom. Actors and characters are highly praised, to the extent that the original version is recommended in order to properly enjoy the accent of the protagonists. Although we can presume a cultural proximity between the US and UK (a user recommends the show “to fans of the ‘Twin Peaks genre’”)⁴⁵, it is interesting to note that Italian users’ reviews constantly underline the difference from US series while interpreting the UK product for its cultural proximity based on the fact that characters look “normal” and not like “supermen, as often happens in American series and films”. Another example of such comparison between

⁴³ Nevertheless, Netflix in August 2018 deleted all user reviews from the website. See T. Spangler, “Netflix Has Deleted All User Reviews From Its Website”, *Variety*, 17 August 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/netflix-deletes-all-user-reviews-1202908904/> (accessed September 24, 2018).

⁴⁴ User reviews were collected on 13 July 2018. *Broadchurch* had a significantly higher number of reviews (71), if compared to other British crime TV shows such as *Paranoid* (ITV 2016; 11 reviews), *Collateral* (BBC Two 2018; 21 reviews), *Happy Valley* (BBC One 2014-; 19), *Marcella* (ITV 2016-; 27), *River* (BBC One 2015; 29), and *Doctor Foster* (BBC One 2015-; 32).

⁴⁵ The translation from Italian is made by the authors.

UK and US is from a reviewer stating: “Such a beautiful atmosphere: in the useless American remake is one of the main missing ingredients”. In one case, nationality is the crucial interpretive key: “A classic English crime: rural town, crimes, ambiguous characters and jealousies”. In another comment, the reference to nationality allows to make a comparison with the Italian production: “I would like one day to see Italian products of this quality, but I am afraid that there will be a long wait”. Even those who did not appreciate the series refer to nationality, as in the comment “sometime, even British people get it wrong”.

Generally speaking, the British production examined is regularly referred to – along with Nordic crime shows – as a quality assurance, and users regularly appreciate the acting style; the authenticity and psychological development of the characters; and how British shows succeed in interpreting the crime genre while providing a ‘snapshot’ of contemporary Great Britain, and offering insights into contemporary issues such as Brexit and immigration.

5. What Italian Cinema is for Netflix UK

Looking instead at the national taxonomy of “Italian” as present in the UK catalogue we focus on the category “Italian Films” in order to discuss the understanding of Italian National cinema emerging from it. While the availability of Italian TV shows is quite limited, in particular in its variety⁴⁶, the 22 texts associated with “Italian films” represent a very diversified offering in terms of genre belonging, production background and ambition⁴⁷. In fact, the list features prestigious national productions; international co-productions; TV products (some of which lasts one hour or less); and independent low-budget documentaries. There is quite a transversal offering of high-middle-low brow products, with films by internationally recognized directors such as Matteo Garrone, Mario Martone, Gabriele

⁴⁶ As June 2018 it features 14 titles, 10 of which are Children animation like *Winx* and *Geronimo Stilton*.

⁴⁷ As June 2018 the texts labeled Italian Films are: *Bianca come il latte, rossa come il sangue* (Giacomo Campiotti, 2013); *The Comfort of Strangers* (*Cortesie per gli ospiti*, Paul Schrader, 1990); *Caffè sospeso* (*Coffee for All*, Fulvio Iannucci & Roly Santos, 2017) *Fiore* (Claudio Giovannesi, 2016); *Viaggio da sola* (*A Five Star Life*, Maria Sole Tognazzi, 2013); *Per qualche dollaro in più* (*For a Few Dollars More*, Sergio Leone, 1965); *Rimetti a noi i nostri debiti* (*Forgive Us our Debts*, Antonio Morabito, 2018); *Franca: Chaos and Recreation* (Francesco Carrozzini, 2016); *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*, Paolo Sorrentino, 2013); *Il giovane favoloso* (*Leopardi*, Mario Martone, 2014); *Influx* (Luca Vullu, 2016); *L'estate addosso* (*Summer Time*, Gabriele Muccino, 2016); *La coppia dei campioni* (Giulio Base, 2016); *My Way* (Antongiulio Panizzi, 2016); *Numero Zero: the Roots of Italian Rap* (Enrico Bini, 2015); *Roberto Saviano: uno scrittore sotto scorta* (Pierfrancesco Diliberto, 2016); *Slam* (Andrea Molaioli, 2017); *Son of Pink Panther* (Blake Edwards, 1993); *Suburra* (Stefano Sollima, 2015); *Il racconto dei racconti* (*Tale of Tales*, Matteo Garrone, 2015); *Taratabong* (Migliazzi and Bondi, 2009); *Too Much Stress for My Heart* (Ludovica Liroso, 2015); *Benvenuto Presidente!* (*Welcome Mr. President!*, Riccardo Milani, 2013).

Muccino and Paolo Sorrentino. The national label also includes a good representation of awards winners, in particular of the Italian David di Donatello award, and, among the feature films, there is a predominance of films produced with the support of the Cinema division of the Italian public Broadcaster RAI, as well as, with minor impact, the *Ministero dei beni culturali*.

The generic division of the Italian film category shows a clear predominance of documentary films and drama, albeit the documentary category features a majority of low-budget non-theatrical products. According to White, a sustained and diverse tradition is a standard feature in national cinema, which needs to comprehend the following sectors: “feature-length narrative (commercial), feature-length and short narrative (semi-commercial/independently produced), documentary (independent or government-subsidised), avant-garde (fully non-commercial), political/Third Cinema”⁴⁸.

With the exclusion of the last two sectors, the others are represented in the presence of Italian films in Netflix UK, hence potentially showing a comprehensive picture of the national production. However, the attempt to grasp an understanding of Italian cinema in the UK by looking at Netflix is challenging.

From a productive perspective, half of the films available are international co-productions, and for two of those films (*The Son of the Pink Panther* and *The Comfort of Strangers*) are shot by non-Italian directors, underlying again the fluidity of the concept of national cinema in a ‘transnational era’. Interestingly, even the original language available in the soundtrack does not help to clarify the Italianness of the category, with almost 1/3 of those films which are available on Netflix are exclusively in English.

Unsurprisingly, Netflix’s offering focuses on contemporaneity, with 19 out of 23 films in the list produced in the past five years making the portrayal of national cinema a contemporary and ephemeral snapshot. Consequently, such portrayal is mainly focussed on synchronicity and avoids a diachronic approach to the taxonomy, compromising in its representation questions of legacy and sustained tradition⁴⁹.

Considering the distribution of the texts labelled as “Italian films”, we can grasp how Netflix does not seem to rely on the user’s previous knowledge through the kind of press coverage following the theatrical exhibition. Only seven of the films offered had in fact had a theatrical distribution in the UK, including *For a Few Dollars More*, *The Son of the Pink Panther* and

⁴⁸ White, “National Belonging”, 225.

⁴⁹ After few weeks from the initial research, *The Great Beauty* and *Tale of Tales* were pulled from Netflix catalogue.

The Comfort of Strangers. Therefore, only four of the 2010s offering could potentially rely on the cultural capital generated by their distribution, reception and promotion in the UK market. Undoubtedly, *Suburra* and *The Great Beauty* are the films that received a wide European distribution and a presence on British theatres⁵⁰ and are also the two products in the list that attracted the majority of users' reviews. In particular, focusing on the crime genre, the British reviews of the film *Suburra* offer an interesting parallel with the Italian users' reviews of the TV series *Broadchurch*. The national connotations emerge mainly to stress the difference of the film in respect to Hollywood canon: "it is not a Hollywood gore fest" or for a comparative approach with reference to the genre belonging, with a user writing, "These Italians are Scandinavia and Latin America for the gangster flicks. Original!! Political!! Real life!! Hollywood is a joke, but that's old news". However, on this occasion, the reviews do not present references to Italian films if not a generic "it looks like there is a new strand of talented Italian directors". That again raises the question of which kind of picture of Italian national cinema emerges from Netflix UK.

The SVOD service, in its attempt to personalize and categorize the catalogue, and feed the algorithms, offers also a set of metadata based on general adjectives that can be associated with a given film/TV show. Looking at the products categorized as "Italian Cinema" we have the following adjectives/labels with their recurrences in brackets. Therefore, for Netflix UK Italian cinema is: Dark (3); Wacky (3); Romantic (2); Gritty (2); Witty (2); Imaginative (2); Understated (2); Scary; Feel good; Steamy; Provocative; Emotional; Inspiring.

Despite the clear use of national cinema as taxonomic tool, Netflix UK does not offer an informed diachronic cultural understanding of Italian cinema based on distribution, availability and consumption history. The lack of a diachronic overview, the dominance of indie documentaries, the problematic role played by some national identifier (languages, settings, director, production etc.) compromises the ability of Netflix to offer a reflection on national cinema in the UK market.

Looking at the genres available is quite revealing of the disconnection between this taxonomy and the cultural capital associated with Italian cinema in different venues of film consumption and exhibition in UK. We are thinking for instance, the lack of Italian Horror

⁵⁰ According to EAO Lumiere from 2013 to 2016 *The Great Beauty* totalled 155,732 single admissions in UK while *Suburra* is a distant second among the Italian films in June 2018 Netflix UK catalogue with 5,113 single admissions. However, *Suburra* is the only other contemporary film in the list which obtained a notable theatrical distribution in UK.

films in the offering, which is arguably the Italian genre with the biggest sub-cultural capital in the UK⁵¹.

The branding of Netflix constantly overshadows other cultural signifiers. The “Italian films” category re-establishes the branding idea, mirroring features associated with global international cinema and ignoring the peculiarities of the UK market and the cultural impact of the national cinema with its audiences. Or, more clearly, there is an attempt to frame Italian cinema in terms of continuity and a seamlessly flow with the rest of the catalogue. The adjectives used as labelling device stress the universality of the film qualities (dark, whacky, etc.) instead of underlying any uniqueness or distinctiveness. Italian cinema as a taxonomy overcomes the understanding based on national specificities, and it is there only to lead to something else or, better, to lead back to the wider offering of the catalogue and to Netflix’s label as a global cultural signifier.

6. Conclusions: A Question of Branding

The European expansion of SVOD services allows new reflections on the role played by the concept of national production from a consumption-based approach. Interestingly, such approach re-establishes all the complexity, the fluidity, and the mutable persistence of the national concept in media production, circulation, and consumption. From supranational and national policies dictating national quotas – while shifting the definition of national belonging on the basis of “cultural tests” – to the use of national labels as taxonomic tools to manage expectations and organize the media offering, SVOD services embody some of the key debates which have surrounded the idea of national cinema in the past 40 years. Debates that can eventually regroup the persistence of the “national” within the two crucial areas for SVOD and online distribution: those of availability and discoverability. The ubiquitous presence of Netflix on the one hand has offered new possibilities for a cross-border availability of European productions (in particular TV) inviting possible speculation of the creation of new cultural capital and understanding of a national production in a given market. On the other hand, the idea of national has played only a marginal role in the discoverability

⁵¹ S. Baschiera, “Streaming Italian Horror Cinema in the United Kingdom: Lovefilm Instant”, *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, 5, 2 (2017): 245-260.

of the catalogue, with the use of metadata immediately associated with broader generic labels, able to create personalized paths in Netflix's offering.

In his recent analyses of SVOD's challenge to traditional television network branding, Michael L Wayne pointed out how "Netflix's user interface obscured the branded origins of television content in order to better position themselves as the audience's primary point of identification"⁵². Netflix, in fact, seems to employ a "portal-as-brand" strategy (different than the programme-as-brand employed, for instance, by HBO) creating a brand at the expense of network brand identities and the production origin of its content. The use of the label "Netflix Originals" to market a show of which they own exclusive rights to in a country is an example of Netflix prioritization of its own brand over the production (and national) origin of a text⁵³. If we consider the role played by national cinema as a marketing strategy, as "an attempt to market the diverse as (...) offering a coherent and singular experience"⁵⁴, we can grasp how the concept of national can be understood as a branding practice and, as such, it is facing now the challenge of SVOD services, in a way not dissimilar to the traditional television network branding.

Surely, as we have pointed out, the 'national' exists in Netflix as a taxonomic tool, an identifier that TV networks and production companies do not have in the catalogue (they are not present in the metadata). However, such taxonomy is far from being relevant *per se*. The idea of national emerging from this taxonomic tool not only focuses on a synchronic understanding, but it aims to reinforce the global brand of Netflix than re-establishing a national one.

⁵² L.M. Wayne, "Netflix, Amazon, and Branded Television Content in Subscription Video on-Demand Portals", *Media, Culture & Society*, 40, 5 (2018): 725-741 (735).

⁵³ See for instance A. Lotz, T. Havens, "Original or Exclusive? Shifts in Television Financing and Distribution Shift Meanings", *Antenna: Responses to Media and Culture*, 1 January 2016, <http://blog.commarks.wisc.edu/2016/01/01/original-or-exclusive-shifts-in-television-financing-and-distribution-shift-meanings/> (accessed September 24, 2018).

⁵⁴ Higson "The Concept of National Cinema", 38.